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THE POETRY OF ALFRED NOYES

BY PHILIP LOMBARD GIVEN

“ I ACKNOWLEDGE my greatest debt to Mr. Kipling,” said Alfred Noyes in a recent lecture. He was speaking of the influences which had molded his poetic thought. This may well be, for Kipling has created a new form of literature which must be reckoned with by those who come after. No big spirit—and Noyes is one, by the way—can escape Mr. Kipling’s influence. It is to actual or at least potential lovers of Kipling that Alfred Noyes speaks. One is impressed with that upon first reading the “ East End Coffee-Stall,” for example, with its almost brutal strength. But strength is not the only thing in Kipling, and it certainly is not in Noyes, who has taken over more of the inward spirit of Kipling’s work than of its rough medium, more of the ringing hopefulness and joy of life than of the sordid exterior. Noyes is a poet, first and always, and sordidness does not of itself delight him; but he is willing, like Kipling, to rub elbows with the rougher parts of life, unlike any modern English poet, except Browning. Mr. Kipling has gone down to the sea in ships and to the East with armies of conquest. “ Men live there,” is his verdict; and where there is real living there is the joy of life. Mr. Noyes has not sailed the world around in person, quite as Mr. Kipling has; but he has traversed the world and the centuries, too, in imagination. His broad sympathy and understanding of all phases of life is remarkable. His subjects are drawn from every field, and he runs the gamut of human emotions. Already, though still a young man, he has carried us through children’s fancies and the joy of youth, to love, romantic adventure, and tragic incident, pictures of roistering taverns, deep woods, enchanted islands, and vast surging oceans, themes of humor, tender memory, courage, and simple faith. All these have been attempted and handled

with equal facility. One begins to wonder what his limitations are. This breadth of sympathy links him with Kipling. Like Kipling, it is not mere versatility, but it is the natural expression of a mind in contact with the elemental part of human nature under all phases. On the surface, there are many differences between the two men. Mr. Kipling is a great writer of stories and of some rather rough, though powerful, verse. Mr. Noyes is the author of a considerable body of poetry in many charming meters and delicate forms of imagination. But the spirit of the two men is the same. To see that Kipling is the starting-point for Alfred Noyes, one has only to compare Noyes's liberal outlook with Tennyson's conventional vision. Alfred Noyes is anything but conventional. He is the spokesman of human nature, quite uninfluenced by the prejudice of class or creed.

To realize Mr. Noyes's power to mingle rough humor with high romance, one has only to read that rollicking, splendidly grotesque tale of "Bacchus and the Pirates." As a recent critic has said, one who read that poem and did not have his heart warmed must have, as the French say, "no interior." Much the same grotesque but delicious theme is found in "Black Bill's Honeymoon" and "Forty Singing Seamen":

Across the seas of Wonderland to Mogadore we plodded,

Forty singing seamen in an old black barque,

And we landed in the twilight where a Polyphemus nodded

With his battered moon-eye winking red and yellow through the dark!

For his eye was growing mellow,

Rich and ripe and red and yellow,

As was time, since old Ulysses made him bellow in the dark!

Cho.: Since Ulysses bunged his eye up with a pine-torch in the dark!

The reason these poems are so satisfyingly humorous is that their foundation is so big. What is only latent in them is expressed directly in that magnificent swinging poem of marching humanity, "Rank and File."

I

Drum-taps! Drum-taps! Who is it marching,

Marching past in the night? Ah, hark,

Draw your curtains aside and see

Endless ranks of the stars o'er-arching

Endless ranks of an army marching,

Marching out of the measureless dark,

Marching away to eternity.

II

See the gleam of the white sad faces
Moving steadily row on row,
Marching away to their hopeless wars:
Drum-taps, drum-taps, where are they marching?
Terrible, beautiful, human faces,
Common as dirt, but softer than snow,
Coarser than clay, but calm as the stars.

IX

What do you know of the shot-riddled banners
Royally surging out of the gloom,
You whose denials their souls despise?
Out in the night they are marching, marching!
Treasure your wisdom, and leave them their banners!
Then—when you follow them down to the tomb
Pray for one glimpse of the faith in their eyes.

This is Kiplingesque strength for you. It is poetry and philosophy as well. There is the stir of valiant endeavor. There is the yearning of a great heart, too, over the sad multitudes of human souls that march through the ages, and a defense of their essential dignity and simple faith.

This plea for simplicity, childlike reverence, and heroic loyalty to those ideals we discover to be our own, is the keynote of Alfred Noyes's philosophy and his message to our chaotic and groping age.

Is the world a heartless mechanism where ideals and emotions are impediments, where we, like little pistons, slide back and forth in a thousand grooves, forever grinding out "products," forever "making good," and forever attaining greater "efficiency"? Or have we found ourselves in a huge arena of conflicting passions, where each individual finds the zest of life in wresting from his neighbor what they neither of them need to be happy, where society is shattered by the struggle of class with class, where the laborer demands more than he deserves, and the organizer is loth to give up that which he did not earn, where the man of thought is driven to watch the struggle in helpless scorn and to express himself, if at all, not in big human emotions, but in subtleties, or in the sensuous enjoyment of beauty? These questions the age is propounding to itself. Most people are avoiding reply by plunging into activity; a few are bitterly answering in the affirmative. The old too literal faith being shattered and none to take its place, men are drifting back upon these rocks.

But to both of these questions as I have put them Alfred Noyes sounds a clarion and prophetic no! Let our struggle no longer be purposeless, our efficiency no longer without a goal. This place we live in is not the world machine of science and business, nor is it merely the economic arena of crude human passions. The world is a place where men labor and struggle, to be sure, but not solely against one another. It is a place where men may be efficient, but not for the sake of efficiency. It is, on the contrary, a region of wonder and romance, where every man is embarked on a great adventure, a joyful adventure, the end of which is mystery, but the manful voyaging of which is the only thing worth while.

Marchaunt Adventurers, chanting at the windlass,
 Early in the morning, we slipped from Plymouth Sound,
 All for Adventure in the great New Regions,
 All for Eldorado and to sail the world around!
 Sing! the red of sunrise ripples round the bows again.
 Marchaunt Adventurers, O sing, we're outward bound,
 All to stuff the sunset in our old black galleon,
 All to seek the merchandise that no man ever found.
Chorus: Marchaunt Adventurers!
 Marchaunt Adventurers!
 Marchaunt Adventurers, O, whither are ye bound?—
 All for Eldorado and the great new Sky-line,
 All to seek the merchandise that no man ever found.

This magnificent Elizabethan song from the "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern" strikes the key-note of Noyes's philosophy. It is at once a protest and a promise; a protest against the tremendous but soulless science of the past century and the joyless materialism of the present, and a promise of new hope, new joy, new realms for "hearts of gold" to conquer.

There is not so much need for Mr. Noyes to protest against Spencer and Darwin, because modern scientists, though admitting the great work those men did, have already repudiated their limited philosophies. The Physicist to-day is confronted by the fact that the farther he drives his pitiless logic into the world of atoms and electrons, the more he is involved in mystery and the less likely is the attainment of some irreducible element of matter. The modern miracle is not that the laws of matter may be momentarily set aside; but that matter itself is becoming so shrouded in mystery that it is hard to distinguish the material from the

non-material. The Biologist no longer is satisfied with the simple doctrine of Natural Selection as a blanket to cover all the unexplained facts of reproduction in the world of plant and animal life. He now admits that Chance, after all, is but a word for explaining away what is not yet explained, and that *some* purpose actuates life. Whether that purpose be a mere "will to live," as Schopenhauer tells us, a self-creating and self-directing energy, as M. Bergson would have us believe, or the moral will of Christianity, may still be debated. But clearly Science is no longer trying to crush the element of mystery and wonder out of life. On the contrary, Science is to-day supporting those things more successfully than any other agency, more than religion itself.

What Noyes's poetry protests against, therefore, is not the science of to-day, but the effect of the science of yesterday upon the life of to-day. Mr. Noyes's poetry protests against the swift and pitiless machinery of modern existence. Why is all our life on such a material basis? Why do our rich men think only of accumulating more money and then of the best way of getting rid of it? Why is all our business run for the sake of efficiency in disregard of human lives and happiness? Why are we giving our poorer brothers cleaner houses to live in and better food to eat, but letting them pick up their spiritual nourishment in the gutters? Why are we ourselves overwhelmed with work and worry without any clear idea where it is all coming out? Simply because we lack a goal. We work for the sake of doing something, to relieve ourselves from ennui, or else we allow ourselves to set up goals that in our hearts we know to be unworthy of the best in us. To sensitive spirits, battered almost into indifference by the resistless motions of the social machine, the manly voices of Kipling and Noyes have come with the promise of new life and joy. Kipling has showed us the eternal value and interestingness of human souls wherever they are found, even in the low places of the earth. Life is worth living, after all, even if it is largely sordid and tragic.

So says Mr. Kipling, making self-expression the essential thing; but Noyes goes him one better. Not only can men live to the fullest as they did once under the splendid humanism of Elizabeth's reign, but they can also live for a purpose, the purpose which only whole-hearted loyalty to, and pursuit of, an ideal can give.

Mr. Noyes's poetry is likely to serve as a strong antidote to some recent tendencies in the world of letters. What with Mr. Shaw continually prodding us with his delicious satire and addling our minds with his intellectual somersaults, and what with all the striving novelists and their fearfully pressing problems of sex and society, we have reached a pitch where the wind of a problem play or the tramp of a suffragette makes a timid man wish for a cyclone-cellar. These writers, like the less clever persons who have been satiating us with verse that either is flabbily sensuous or strives after "virile" effects by presenting objects purely brutal and uncouth, have no doubt served their turn. But we listen with relief and joy to a new voice which sings easily and out of a great simplicity, of themes neither superficial nor degrading but ennobling and deep as humanity itself.

I challenge any of Mr. Noyes's clever critics to pen such a rollicking, blissful, mad spring tune as "The World's May Queen," or such a delicately suggestive lyric of tender memory and childlike feeling as "Haunted in Old Japan":

Music of the star-shine shimmering o'er the sea
Mirror me no longer in the dusk of memory:
Dim and white the rose-leaves drift along the shore.
Wind among the roses, blow no more!

Lonely starry faces, wonderful and white,
Yearning with a cry across the dim sweet night,
All our dreams are blown adrift as flowers before a fan,
All our hearts are haunted in the heart of old Japan.

All along the purple creek, lit with silver foam,
Sobbing, sobbing voices, cry no more of home!
Soft beyond the cherry-trees, o'er the dim lagoon,
Dawns the crimson lantern of the large low moon.

The simplicity of Mr. Noyes's poetry is just the thing that confounds his critics. Accustomed to complexity of thought and subtlety of feeling in the later work of Henry James and George Meredith, and to psychological introspection in all the modern novel writers, and to the clever paradoxes of Chesterton and Shaw, and accustomed in poetry, on the other hand, to the sensuous imagery of Swinburne and the pretty sentiment of some more recent writers, it is difficult for many of the critics to appreciate this new poet with his big thought and his heart of a child. Failing to see

the breadth of his ideas and the depth of his feeling, the only thing left for these gentlemen to do, naturally, is to pick flaws in the form and criticise Mr. Noyes for his lack of compactness and neatness of language and his "journalistic fluency." He is fluent, to be sure, but it is a divine abundance of thought and feeling, not the carelessness of one unfaithful to his art. It may be admitted that his lines have not such condensed beauty as those of Shelley or Keats; but Alfred Noyes has bigger, more human feelings to convey than either of those poets. He does not suggest the Lethean sweetness of the nightingale's song nor the rushing, luminous, aerial beauty of the clouds, but he does sing the joy and greatness of human loyalty and strenuous endeavor. These are great themes, and Mr. Noyes will take his place as their spokesman along with Kipling and Browning, whose splendid humanism, by the way, was decidedly before its time.

No quotation could possibly do justice to these great themes. They are to be found throughout Mr. Noyes's work, and more strongly in his longer poems than in the short ones. In "Drake," we find perhaps their fullest expression. In spite of many youthful defects, of repetition, exaggeration, exuberance of imagery, and a few arid passages, "Drake" maintains a surprisingly high level and comes very near to being a great poem. "Flos Mercatorum," the eighth of the "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern," is a shorter and more mature expression of this theme of honorable endeavor toward an ideal goal. The narrator, at the close, describes old Whittington, the great Lord Mayor of London, and his Alice, after a life of strenuous labor kneeling like children in prayer.

From such simple hearts,
O never doubt it, though the whole world doubt
The God that made it, came the steadfast strength
Of England, all that once was her strong soul,
The soul that laughed and shook away defeat
As her strong cliffs hurl back the streaming seas.

To categorize Mr. Noyes's poetry as the "bubbling of a mountain spring" is hardly a statement of the whole truth in the face of such high themes as these, so magnificently handled. To call him emotional, but not intellectual, is dangerous, as casting some suspicion upon the capacity of the speaker's own thinking apparatus. Like all men who think

on broad and big lines, Mr. Noyes does not beat about the bush, but marches straight to his goal, not deigning to say clever things which do not advance the main theme, or to placate the persons who "would peep and botanize" about his feet.

And yet Mr. Noyes has lighter moods. Indeed, they are better known than his bigger work. Some of his early songs—if anything can be called early for one still so very young—are very beautiful; for example, "The Return," "O Hedges white with laughing May." The charming lyrics which stud the splendor of "Drake" and the beauty of "Sherwood" would make the fame of an ordinary man; such, for example, as "Nymphs and naiads, come away" or "Now the purple night is past," or Blondel's song in "Sherwood."

"The Flower of Old Japan" is typical of a number of poems dealing with the fancies and emotions of childhood. These poems, like Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses," were, of course, not written solely for children. They communicate to grown-ups the spirit of childhood. This world of fancy not all of us have been through, even as children; but to such as have, these poems bring a renewal of happy dreams and a revelation, too, of our loss through the silent passing of the years.

*The road to old Japan! you cry,
And is it far or near?
Some never find it till they die;
Some find it everywhere;
The road where restful Time forgets
His weary thoughts and wild regrets
And calls the golden year
Back in a fairy dream to smile
On young and old a little while.*

If Mr. Noyes, with all his versatility, had done nothing more than lead us into impossible and perhaps really un-Japanese, but dear, delightful Old Japan, he would have deserved a crown of laurel from all the men and women who really once were children. Would that we all might be as successful as Mr. Noyes in keeping fresh within our deepest heart a gleam of the pure child's spirit. For he who possesses it need not wander far afield to satisfy the deepest of human longings, the desire for something beyond our ken which stirs and baffles us in every great work of art or nature

and in every shining human face. It is that which transcends beauty and knowledge, the mystery, and at the same time the heart, of the universe.

A word must be spoken of the rich imagery of Noyes's poetry. It barely needs to be mentioned to recall a hundred examples. No poet since Swinburne, except Francis Thompson, has had such a facile command of visual description. Take, for example, these delicious stanzas from "The Rock Pool":

And over soft brown woods, limpid, serene,
Puffing its fans the Nautilus went its way,
And from a hundred salt and weedy shelves
Peered little horned faces of sea-elves:
The prawn darted, half seen,
Thro' watery sunlight, like a pale green ray,
And all around, from soft green waving bowers,
Creatures like fruit out-crept from fluted shells like flowers

Suddenly, from that heaven beyond belief,
Suddenly, from that world beyond its ken,
Dashing great billows o'er its rosy bars,
Shivering its dreams into a thousand stars,
Flooding each sun-dried reef
With waves of color, (as once, for mortal men
Bethesda's angel) with blue eyes, wide and wild,
Naked into the pool there stepped a little child.

Her red-gold hair against the far green sea
Blew thickly out: her slender golden form
Shone dark against the richly waning West
As with one hand she splashed her glistening breast,
Then waded up to her knee
And frothed the whole pool into a fairy storm!
So, stooping through our skies, of old, there came
Angels that once could set this world's dark pool aflame.

It is hardly necessary to speak of the splendid rhythm of Mr. Noyes's poetry. That, like his imagery, is one of the first things to strike the reader, and continue to move him with wonder. It is not that the rhythm is complex. Usually, like his thought, it is easy to comprehend; but complexity and obscurity are not the distinguishing marks of genius, though unfortunately genius is sometimes unable to express clearly its noblest ideas. The Noysian meter, though of great variety, has a certain characteristic sameness; but the one who says to himself, "Go to! I can write

as good," will soon find himself undeceived. The tempestuous sweep of "Drake," the human joy of "The Barrel-Organ," the gay and tender music of "The Companion of a Mile," wherein we find and love Will Kemp, "a man so quick to bleed at a pin-prick or to leap laughing through hell to save a butterfly," all these have rhythms beyond the power of imitation.

My purpose is not to extol Alfred Noyes's power and skill as a poet—that will be recognized soon enough—but rather to understand him and try to put in laboring prose a few of the ideas that underlie his work, and express in conceptual language the meaning of the feelings he arouses. It has been said that "the most important characteristic of the real critic—the man who penetrates the secret of a work of art—is the ability to admire greatly." It is not the only requisite, to be sure, but it is, after all, "the most important." The greatest kind of criticism and, unfortunately, the most scarce, is that which by this method reaches the heart, the spirit, the philosophy of a writer, and does not content itself with an easier and perhaps more entertaining account of the externals of his art.

Mr. Noyes has recently published some forceful appeals for world peace. Thus he would not encourage too close an imitation of the Elizabethan Age, with its rough and somewhat bloodthirsty ways. There is no inconsistency in this. Mr. Noyes's purpose in writing "Drake" and the "Tales of the Mermaid" was not to draw an accurately historical picture of the times. That is the part of the scholar, not of the poet. It may well be doubted that Elizabeth was quite as gracious, or Francis Drake quite as noble, as they are depicted; or that the gods at the Mermaid acted and talked quite so divinely. Yet we may well believe they often rose to such levels or even higher, in spite of the experienced gentleman who was reminded of "the old crowd in Bill's room at college, as described at a reunion dinner by a teary alumnus after three glasses of champagne"! The remark is its own refutation. Mr. Noyes is neither an historian nor a "teary alumnus," but a poet who is trying to give us human emotions at their healthy biggest and deepest. In this sense, he has caught the soul of the Elizabethan Age like no writer since that time. I, for one, do not see in him this "eternal nostalgia of the past, half-stifled by our self-complacency and our belief in human perfectability!" Mr.

Noyes does not necessarily believe in perfectability; but he does believe in the power of ideal concepts of perfection in human life, and it is his endeavor by the use of them to stir the world to nobler quests and more splendid achievement. But clearly it is to civilized, not barbarous achievement. Mr. Noyes can well decry war as wanton destruction and degradation, and urge modern men to find their romance in more civilized ways. Better than plundering Spanish galleons on the high seas is the pursuit of a right, but unpopular, course of action or even a simple and efficient loyalty to one's job.

Among the discordant voices of a multitude of pseudo-spiritual leaders, these things may profitably be spoken with the quiet dignity which they demand. Mr. Noyes sees the confusion of the times and all the running after strange gods—almost laughable if it were not so serious. He was thinking, perhaps, of this baffled searching for spiritual truth when he wrote the dazed and broken cry of the "Mad Moonshee," which expresses also the thought that it is so difficult for people who have accustomed themselves to think in terms of purely material ends to understand a great new spiritual idea:

If the blossoms were beans,
I should know what it means—
This blaze, which I certainly cannot endure;
It is evil, too,
For its color is blue,
And the sense of the matter is quite obscure.
Celestial truth
Is the food of youth;
But the music was dark as a moonless night.
The facts in the song
Were all of them wrong,
And there was not a single sum done right;
Tho' a metaphysician amongst the crowd,
In a voice that was notably deep and loud,
Repeated, as fast as he was able,
The whole of the multiplication table.

Mr. Noyes, however, has neither the dazed uncertainty of the Mad Moonshee, nor the heavy dogmatism of the metaphysician. His message is clearly a spiritual one. There is nothing in Tennyson, Browning, Kipling, or anywhere else which strikes the spiritual note more boldly than that wonderful song in "Sherwood," "The Old Knight's Vigil":

Once, in this chapel, Lord
Young and undaunted,
Over my virgin sword
Lightly I chaunted—
“Dawn ends my watch. I go
Shining to meet the foe!”

“Swift with thy dawn,” I said,
“Set the lists ringing!
Soon shall thy foe be sped,
And the world singing!
Bless my bright plume for me,
Christ, King of Chivalry.

“War-worn, I kneel to-night,
Lord, by Thine altar!
Oh, in to-morrow’s fight,
Let me not falter!
Bless my dark arms for me,
Christ, King of Chivalry.

“Keep Thou my broken sword
All the long night through
While I keep watch and ward!
Then—the red fight through,
Bless the wrenched haft for me,
Christ, King of Chivalry.

“Keep, in Thy piercéd hands,
Still the bruised helmet:
Let not their hostile bands
Wholly o’erwhelm it!
Bless my poor shield for me,
Christ, King of Chivalry.

“Keep Thou the sullied mail,
Lord, that I tender
Here, at Thine altar-rail!
Then—let Thy splendour
Touch it once . . . and I go
Stainless to meet the foe.”

If poetry is to be the religion of the future, we have here a very successful beginning. It is serious poetry, at any rate, whatever its future rank may be, and it has a remarkably broad emotional appeal. It is not for one class, but for all classes. It is not for esthetes, ministers, or socialists only, but it is for big-hearted leaders of men everywhere.

PHILIP LOMBARD GIVEN.